A CONJECTURE ON THE OPENING OF THE SECOND MERSEBURG CHARM

by Joseph B. Wilson

There has been extensive discussion of the Merseburg Charms, particularly the second of the two, since their discovery by Waitz in 1841 and their initial publication and elucidation by Jacob Grimm.¹ The text of the Second Charm reads approximately as follows (dividing the words more in accordance with modern practice and regrouping and numbering the lines as alliterating verse):

1. P(h)ol ende uuodan uuorun zi holza
2. du uuart demo balderes uolon sin uuoz birenkici
3. thu biguol'en sikhigunt sunna era suister
4. thu biguol'en fritia uolla era suister
5. thu biguol'en uuodan so he uuola conda
6. sose benrenki sose bluotrenki sose lidirenki
7. ben zi bena bluot zi bluoda lid zi geliden
8. sose gelimida sin

While the scribal hand is relatively clear, the division into words and phrases is indistinct and a number of letters could be disputed. The metrical arrangement of the last three lines (as cited above) is debatable (the entire charm is written continuously in the manuscript, as if it were prose). The first word—the greatest enigma of the charm—is written Pol with an h added over the o; precisely how this was intended to be read no one knows. Obviously the normalizations found in the literature (or even the minimal editing employed here) do not allow unprejudiced study. Such study must, of course, primarily base on the manuscript itself (or faithful reproductions).² In respect to the problem I wish to discuss here, it should be particularly noted that the scribe uses u and uzh ambiguously and that therefore the commonly encountered normalizations of these, such as uuorun to vuorun, uuodan to Uuodan, uuola to wola,³ etc., have no foundation in the manuscript.

The overall meaning of the charm is admirably apparent, which

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fact one should not lose sight of nor fail to appreciate when de-
bating the more obscure details. A generally acceptable translation
into modern German would read something like this: 4

1. Pfol lor Voi und Wodan    fuhren zu Holz;
2. Da ward dem Pferd Balders    sein Fuß verrenkt,
3. Da besprach ihn Iden fuß1 Sinhtgunt,         [und] Sunna, ihre Schwester;
   4. Da besprach ihn Frija,         lundl Volla, ihre Schwester;
4. Da besprach ihn Wodan,         weil es woh auch konnte:
5. Sei es Beinverrenkung,         sei es Blutverrenkung,
6. Sei es Beinverrenkung,         sei es Gliederverrenkung,
7. Bein zu Bein,     Blut zu Blut, Glied zu Gliedern,
8. Als wena sie geleimt seien!

The great importance of this charm is that it is the only pro-
fessedly pagan Germanic literature extant from Germany. In these
few lines we have not only a glimpse into pre-Christian poetic
form and heathen practices (which the First Merseburg Charm also
affords), but also the only poetic employment of old Germanic
gods in all of Old High German and Old Saxon literature. Even the
modern reader is infected by Grimm’s enthusiasm in his report on
the discovery of this charm, which in its eight lines mentions
almost as many old Germanic deities. Indeed, while five of the deities
are known from other literature (principally Old Norse), Phol
(which on the face of things seems to signify a god) and Sinhtgunt
are attested only here. The only other references at all to the
ancient gods in Old German writings—far inferior to those here,
but precious nonetheless—are found in the “Old Saxon Baptismal
Vow” (ec forsacho allum dioboles uercum and uerdum, Thunner
ende Uvoden ende Saxnote ende allum them unholdum, the hira
genotas sint “I renounce all the devil’s works and words, Donner
[Thor] and Wodan and Saxnot and all those evil ones that are
their fellows”) 5 and in the charm “Gegen Fallsucht” (doner dutigo
dietewigo, evidently a no longer understood invocation of Donner
surviving only as a magic formula). 6

It is consequently not surprising that the major controversy in
the study of the Second Merseburg Charm has centered about the
interpretation of these deities. The problems involving the goddesses
of lines 3 and 4, which will not be gone into further here, con-
cern their identity and interpretation and, specifically, whether
the reading is “Sinhtgunt (and) Sunna, her sister” and similarly
“Friia (and) Volla, her sister” or rather “Sinhtgunt, Sunna’s sister”
and “Friia, Volla’s sister.” Since they play only a minor role in
the charm itself, their essential interest lies in their testimony for
continental Germanic mythology. Much more important are the problems of the introduction, which concern primarily the clarification of Phol and Balder. The interest of the scholars has naturally focused on these two words, since even the simple understanding of the narrative introduction (the Analogieerzählung) of the charm depends on their identity (e.g., Who is present? Whose horse is injured?). The mysterious Phol is apparently a companion of Wodan and therefore one of the chief gods, but nowhere else is such a god attested. Moreover, why does the poem not mention Balder (evidently the god of light—and son of Wodan and Friia—well known from the Eddas) at the outset, since the whole situation revolves about his horse? Already Jacob Grimm found a solution which still is widely accepted today: Pfol (the pronunciation most naturally represented by Phol) is held to be another name for Balder (an assumption which bases upon the similarity of place names beginning with Pholes-/Pfoles- and Balderes-), thus explaining both the identity of Phol as well as Balder’s apparent lack of mention in the opening line. The essentials of Grimm’s view were universally accepted for forty years. This “Grimm school” (Kuhn, Grienberger, Niedner, etc.) considered the original heathen Germanic nature of the charm self-evident, and the narrative was given romantic nature-mythological interpretations, basically to the effect that Balder symbolized the sun on its daily ride, from which any threat of hindrance (represented by the sprained horse’s hoof) had to be repelled quickly. The first to challenge this school’s basis, ingenious as it was, was the famous Scandinavianist Bugge (op. cit., pp. 284 ff.), who noted that the Old English form of the word balder does not signify a god at all but rather merely the common noun “lord,” which would justify the rendition here in the second line as “the lord’s [i.e., Wodan’s, or perhaps even Phol’s] horse” and allow other possibilities of interpretation of Phol. The connection with the god Balder and the resultant “day-myth” is consequently rejected. Other scholars (especially Krohn, Mansikka, Christiansen, and Ohrt) furnished further evidence for this less colorful line of reasoning, so that an opposing basic school arose, denying even the original heathen origin of the charm. Although the individual conjectures of the scholars seemingly know no bounds, the two fundamental schools remain even to this day. Other suggestions that have been offered for Phol are a god or goddess Vol (which, with Pfol, is the most widely accepted), Paul, Apollo, Hol, Wol, etc., while others have rejected this track altogether and taken, for instance, Pholende together as an adjective or participial
phrase modifying Wodan, i.e., Pholen te uuodan “Wodan on horseback” (Wadstein) or volhendi uuodan “full-handed (helpful) Wodan” (Krogmann).\(^8\)

Remarkably enough, the crucial evidence for the form and interpretation of Phol has been sought in the modest little verb uuorun, whose identity as fuorun has never been questioned.\(^9\) The main stave of the line has always been considered to be the \(f\) of this fuorun, and since uuodan obviously does not alliterate with it, it has been taken for granted that Phol must do so and consequently, whatever it is, it must begin with \(f\) or at least—because the spelling and the placenames support Pfol—with \(pf\). While the interpretation as Pfol is very attractive and may well be correct, the alliteration of \(pf\) with \(f\) is impossible; at least—to avoid falling into the pit of absolute negation which I later here condemn—it contradicts all that is certain about Germanic alliteration. Unfortunately, since \(pf\) occurs only in Old High German and since so little Old High German alliterative poetry has survived, we have not a single instance of its use as stave. However, the ironclad rule for every other consonant group in any Germanic dialect requires alliteration with the first consonant of the group (or with the first two in the case of \(sk, sp,\) and \(st\)), never with the second; thus \(pf\) would alliterate with \(p\) (if indeed with anything besides itself) but not with \(f\).\(^10\) The case for Pfol is consequently supported by the spelling and the place names but undermined by the alleged alliterative connection with uuorun, while conversely Vol is upheld by this alliterative connection and weakened by the spelling\(^11\) and the place names. I think there is good reason to believe that this alliterative connection is erroneous. If this is correct, the onset of Phol could—as far as the alliteration is concerned—be any phoneme, i.e., the spelling could be interpreted as Pfol, Vol, Pol, Wol, Thol (in the last two, taking \(P\) as the wen or thorn rune), etc., or we would be much more at liberty to suggest emendations of the spelling or even of the whole word, which may very well be necessary in order to arrive at the correct wording and sense of the poem.

What I want to suggest as the first necessary step toward the solution of this complex of intertwined problems is a reevaluation of the key word uuorun. Taken as fuorun, the alliteration of the first line has always been considered to be \(ax:ax\), i.e., having the stave borne by the first of the two accented syllables of each half-line. While this is (with \(aa:ax\)) the most common alliterative scheme, it contrasts sharply with all the other alliterating lines in the poem, in which the second of the two accented syllables of the
first half-line carries the main stress and the stave (lines 2, 3, 4, and 5 thus exhibit the pattern \( xa:ax \); lines 6, 7, and 8 are metrically unclear but do not contradict this principle). I find it particularly noteworthy that the stress curve of every first half-line of the charm is rising, so that each line begins with a crescendo which even to the modern’s uninitiated ear seems appropriate for incantation. This indeed appears to be the regular stress (and consequently alliterative) pattern of the old Germanic charms, contrary to the predominately falling stress and resultant \( ax \) or \( \dot{a}a \) scheme of the other poetry; the First Merseburg Charm uses it (\( xa \) and \( a\dot{a} \) in the first half-lines, with clear crescendo) and so do a number of others. Particularly parallel to the case at hand is such as Christ unde Johan giengon zuo der Jordan (Steinmeyer, p. 379), in which the second person mentioned bears the stress and the stave. The metric pattern of the entire rest of our poem and of similar charms thus strongly suggests that the stave-bearer of the first half-line is not Phol at all, but \( uuodan \), especially in view of the parallel to line 5: \( thu \ biguol’en uuodan, so he uuola conda \). This scansion furthermore would give Wodan the eminence it naturally deserves, since Wodan is both the superior deity mentioned (indeed, the chief of all Germanic gods) and also the main figure in the poem. Whatever Phol or Pholende means, Wodan will remain the most important word in the first half-line, and as such it would most naturally bear the stronger of the two stresses and carry the stave.

Let us then assume for the moment that the stave of the first half-line is the \( w \) of Wodan. With this hypothesis \( uuorun \) cannot be \( fuorun \) but rather must be something beginning with \( w \). A solution is immediately apparent: \( uuorun \) must be \( warun \) (“waren”) and the line becomes Pfol [or something] und Wódan waren im Holz. The sense has not changed greatly as against the previous interpretations, but the stress and alliteration scheme now is the same as in the rest of the charm; Wodan has the place of prominence it merits, and the troublesome forced alliteration of Phol with \( uuorun \) is eliminated.

There are, of course, a number of hurdles to be taken—some more, some less obvious—before we can consider \( warun \) a serious contender for the position in which \( fuorun \) seems so well entrenched. Looking first at the spelling, we see that the initial \( uu \) is ambiguously used by our scribe (and generally in Old High German) and can just as well designate \([w] \) (or \([wu] \)) as \([fu] \): note, for instance, \( uuola \) (\(=wola \)) versus \( uuoz \) (\(=fuoz \)); as a matter of fact,
uo is generally much more common in Old High German for [w] than for [fu], which latter is almost always spelled fu. The last three letters, run, likewise apply equally well to either interpretation, warun or fuorun. The obvious, and remaining, obstacle, as far as the spelling is concerned, is the o, which would be highly unusual in a rendition of warun; however, we may leave the o as an inexact spelling or a variant pronunciation, or we may emend it as an error\(^1\) (all of which possibilities are, of course, common philological practice in dealing with Old High German texts) and accept at worst a small negative quantity in our balance. Turning again to the metrics, this time to confirm the possibility of warun as stave-bearer, it can be demonstrated that warun (war, etc.) did frequently serve in this role, e.g., Heliand 157, 717, 2012, 5684;\(^2\) a rather exact parallel (where was bears the main stave) is to be found in Heliand 8044: was zuarsago, the her giu was lango. If we look next at the sentence thus construed, we find that uxorun zi holsa can very well be taken as “waren im Wald,” since zi holza can mean “in the woods” as well as “to the woods”; the former meaning was, to be sure, a subsequent development from the latter, but was available already in Old High German.\(^3\)

If, finally, we compare the narrative introduction here with that of similar charms in old and later Germanic, we do, to be sure, note that most of the parallels speak for the interpretation fuorun by their employment of a verb of motion, e.g., Quam Krist endi sancti Stephan zi ther burg zu Salonium (Steinmeyer, p. 367), Oden rider over sten och berg (Bugge, p. 287), but others similarly testify in favor of warun, e.g., St. Peter saß auf einem Stein,\(^4\) and Oden staar paa berget, han spörjer efter sin faale (Bugge, p. 287). The variant versions of the charm “Gegen Fallsucht” (Steinmeyer, p. 380) use both types: one has quam where the other twice uses stuont. The First Merseburg Charm would, on the face of it, support warun, since it apparently begins einst saßen Idisen; however, sazen might here mean setzten sich, which would be less clear, or even support fuorun.\(^5\) At any rate, the parallel narratives of similar charms do not by any means exclude the interpretation warun zi holza, but rather demonstrate its plausibility.

To recapitulate, I have endeavored to show that the meter, the sense, and the difficulties with Phol strongly suggest that the stave-bearer of the first half-line is Wodan rather than Phol, that the second half-line can with striking ease be reinterpreted to alliterate with Wodan, and that this reinterpretation is credible from the
viewpoints of the spelling, the metrics, the meaning, and the parallel charms. Pfol [or something] und Wodan waren zu Holze is not only a possible alternate reading, it is actually preferable to the generally accepted rendition in that it gives Wodan its natural prominence and in that the meter then accords with the rest of the poem and with the charms in general. The important further consequence is that Phol no longer has to alliterate, and so the chief barrier to more satisfying interpretations of this mysterious word is lifted.

NOTES

1. Grimm's historic lecture was before the Königliche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin on Feb. 3, 1842; the text is available in the Philologische und historische Abhandlungen (1842) of that society and also conveniently in Jacob Grimm, Kleinere Schriften (Berlin, 1865-1890), II, 1-29. One can only stand in awe before the genius of the father of Germanic philology, who in this initial report of the discovery of the charms already saw and explained most of the problems and possible solutions. On the ensuing discussion, even until the present, note the typical comment by Adolf Spamer in his recent article "P(h)ol ende Uuodan," Deutsches Jahrbuch für Volkskunde, III (1957), 347; "Aber dieser allbekannte Zweite Merseburger Zauberspruch ist nicht nur der meist gedeutete und doch in manchen Fragen bis heute noch wie zu Zeiten seiner Entdeckung umstrittene Text des deutschen Altertums."

2. Photographs are available, for instance, in Hanns Fischer, Schrifttafeln zum althochdeutschen Lesebuch (Tübingen, 1966) and Gerhard Eis, Altdeutsche Handschriften (Munich, 1949); neither is very legible in places. There is an excellent facsimile appended to Grimm's Kleinere Schriften, II.

3. These three examples are taken from S. Bugge's important discussion in his Studier over de nordiske Gude- og Hellesags Oprindelse (Christiania, 1881-1889), p. 285.


6. Ibid., p. 380.


8. Surveys of the history of the research are given in a number of the longer articles; see especially Reidar Th. Christiansen, Die finnischen und nordischen Varianten des zweiten Merseburgerspruches ("Folklore Fellows Communications," No. 18 [Hamina, Finland, 1914]), pp. 1-17, which reviews the early scholarship from the viewpoint of the Bugge school, and, for instance, Spamer, op. cit., which is recent and partisan to the Grimm school. See, of course, also the handbooks, notably J. Knight Bostock, A Handbook on Old High German Literature (Oxford, 1955), and Heinz Rupp, "Forschung zur althochdeutschen Literatur 1945-1962," Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für
9. Bostock's statement, op. cit., p. 23, is typical: "The only detail which is fairly certain in regard to Pholl is the initial consonant, for it should alliterate with vuorun." Those who construe Pholende as modifying vuodan require fuor singular and therefore understand the following as fuor unzi ("fuhr bis zum"); the argument concerning the alliteration remains unchanged.

10. The question of the possibility of the alliteration of pf with f has never been thoroughly investigated. The scholars (e.g., Schück, Grienberger, Brate, Gutenbrunner) have intuitively labeled it poor, imperfect, or impure, without rejecting it altogether. Our feeling for pf is contaminated by the subsequent shift pf>f (e.g., 'feiffen, 'ferd), so that to our ears initial pf is associated more with initial f than with initial p, but there is little reason to think that this was so in Old High German (some spellings do seem to support the association with f, but then again others testify for p). We should not expect, until the contrary is proven, the rime pf/f any more than gr/r or fl/l. The only support for such alliteration would come from the few instances of hl/l, hr/r, and hw/w in Old English and Old Saxon, but these are only rare exceptions (probably representing phonetic l/l, r/r, and w/w) to the many regular alliterations of hl, hr, and hw with h; see W. P. Lehmann's valuable compilations: The Alliteration of Old Saxon Poetry ("Norsk Tidsskrift for Sprogvidenskap," Suppl. Bind III [Oslo, 1958]), and (with Virginia F. Dailey) The Alliterations of the Christ, Guthlac, ... (University of Texas, Austin, 1960). It might be pleaded that the shift pf>f had already taken place in our charm so that we have Fol (<Pfol)/fuorun, but this contradicts the very evidence (besides the spelling) upon which the case for Pfol is built, namely the place names in Pfoles- (cf. Hugo Gering, "Der Zweite Merseburger Spruch," Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie, XXVI, [1894], 146).

11. Ph was, of course, the common Old High German spelling for pf. Although Friedrich Kauffmann, Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur, XV (1889), 208, has demonstrated that initial ph did occur sometimes as a spelling for f, it was evidently rare, as a perusal of Graff's actual entries shows. In our charm, f is spelled three or four times with u, and once with f. Even on the basis of Latin orthographical convention, ph should here represent pf, as Ferdinand Wrede's analysis has shown, Sitzungsberichte der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin), Philosophisch-historische Klasse, 1923, pp. 85-89.

12. Andreas Heusler, Deutsche Versgeschichte, Vol. I (Berlin, 1925), §129, calls attention to this preponderance of the otherwise limited xa pattern in our charm.

half-lines; I take the two viewpoints to be compatible and mutually supporting. The rising stress of each first half-line coupled with the fall of the second half-line gives each complete line a unique curve with its culmination at the second beat, precisely as Heusler, *Die altgermanische Dichtung* (reprint of 2nd ed.; Darmstadt, 1957), p. 58, states in regard to the charm *Gang uz, nesso*: "Das stete Überwiegen des zweiten Iktus bringt eine eigene Kurve hervor."

14. On the predominantly falling stress, cf. Heusler, *Dte. Versg.*, I, §138, and Eduard Sievers, *Altgermanische Metrik* (Halle, 1883), §19.3. Heusler, ibid., §129, gives statistics on the ratio of *aa* to *ax* to *xa* in the first half-lines for various works; the percentage of *xa* fluctuates between seven and thirty percent. Other charms with *xa* are, for instance, *Gang uz, nesso* (Steinmeyer, p. 374; cf. the Heusler quote in note 13 above), *Woda, wicht* (Steinmeyer, p. 389), and *Daz in nievoodar nigitu* (Steinmeyer, p. 333). Others have the predominant crescendo (sometimes even in the second half-lines), but with *ax* alliteration (*Tumbo eax in berke*, Steinmeyer, p. 375), with mixed impure alliteration and endrime (*Kirst, imbi khtzce*, Steinmeyer, p. 396; *Io dir nach eke*, Steinmeyer, p. 397), or with endrime alone (*Ih besuere dil, sunno*, Steinmeyer, p. 373).

15. Even if we assume the poem to have evolved from the Balder myth, in its present form Wodan is the central figure; cf. R. M. Meyer's review of Fr. Losch's *Balder und der Weisse Hirsch* in *Anzeiger für deutsches Altertum*, XIX (1893), 211. The fact that Wodan is mentioned second does not alter this; cf. Spamer, p. 352.

16. Cf. Sievers, §19.3: "Steht nur ein Stab *in* the first half-line, so trifft er die stärkere der beiden Hebungen..." While this is usually the first stressed word, and there is furthermore the general rule that the first of two nouns ordinarily bears the stave, these rules do not hold if the second stressed word is more important and consequently especially accented (Sievers, §§19,3 and 23,2; cf. also H. Kuhn, "Zur Wortstellung und -betonung im Altgermanischen," *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur*, LVII (1933), 72). There can be great harm in overly emphasizing these general rules, such as the rules of word rank in alliteration (first of two nouns, noun over verb, etc.), in the way that, for example, Karl Helm does in his article "Erfundene Götter" in *Studien zur deutschen Philologie des Mittelalters [Festschrift Fr. Panzer]* (Heidelberg, 1950), pp. 1-11; note that these same rules which are cited to exclude Wodan from alliterating (first of two nouns, noun over verb, etc.) would also exclude *uonor* (no matter whether it is *fuorun* or *zuarun*, because in either case it is a verb before a noun), and I find nobody suggesting that. Moreover, line 2 of our charm would be impossible, since its second noun (*uolon*) alliterates. It is a most unfortunate but tenacious misuse of statistics that "infrequent" becomes equated with "incorrect" or even "impossible" (as in Heusler, *Dte. Versg.*, I, §§138 f.). Although Sievers himself is guilty of such, he admits (§126) that none of these rules hold very well for Old High German poetry. In regard to *balderes uolon*, Helm quite correctly points out that if *balder* were a person not previously mentioned it would most naturally bear the stress and alliterate, and since it does not, Helm considers that it must be an appellative for a person already named, but his distinction between appellatives and proper names as a further strict rank of alliteration is without basis (cf. H. Kuhn,
"Es gibt kein balder 'Herr'" in Erbe der Vergangenheit, Festgabe für K. Helm (Tübingen, 1951, p. 45), and he is incorrect in stating that the two exceptions to the "first of two nouns" rule cited by Heusler, Die. Versg., I, §139, are the only ones found in West Germanic (even Sievers gives others, see §23.2).

17. H. Schück, Studier i nordisk litteratur- och religionshistoria, Vol. II (Stockholm, 1904), p. 218, and S. Gutenbrunner, "Der Zweite Merseburger Spruch im Lichte norischer Überlieferungen," Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum, LXXX (1943), 1-5, failed to see this possibility, which would have supported their conjectures (Phol = Wolt, resp. = wot or hol).

18. I can find no Old High German spelling of warun with o in the stem, but Grimm's dictionary lists similar forms for the modern dialects, notably for Thüringisch, which was considered by Grimm and Steinmeyer to be the dialect of the Merseburg Charms and which is at any rate geographically close. The scribe may even have been influenced by the o of the preceding uuodan to write uuorun instead of uuorun. Such influences were common; note, for instance, Gerhard Eis's much more drastic suggestion ("Eine neue Deutung des Ersten Merseburger Zauberspruches," Forschungen und Fortschritte, XXXII (1958), 27 ff.) that, in the First Charm, hera duoder is a mistake for herna mudder (m replaced by d because of the following d).


20. Cf. Notker, Ps. 73,4, and Edward Sehrt, Notker-Glossar (Tübingen, 1962) under holz; similar phrases using zu in the sense of "at" or "in" with other nouns (holz being rare in Old High German) are very common, cf. Sehrt under ze and Johann Kelle, Glossar der Sprache Otfrids (Regensburg, 1881), under zi, contrary to Grimm's dictionary (XVI, 206) which incorrectly says this usage is restricted in Old High German to place names and superlatives (but does concede that such phrases as waren zu Holze were among the first to take on the meaning "at, in").

21. K. Müllenhoff and W. Scherer, Denkmäler deutscher Poesie und Prosa aus dem VIII.-XII. Jahrhundert, 3rd. ed. (Berlin, 1892), II, 47. See especially also Hampp, op. cit. (note 7 above), in regard to these and other parallel charms.

22. Grimm (Kleinere Schriften, II, 4) and Th. von Grienberger ("Die Merseburger Zaubersprüche," Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie, XXVII (1895), 435), among others, take it to be saßen, while Müllenhoff and Scherer (op. cit., p. 43) supports setzten sich.